

Defense Mechanisms among Bachelor of Elementary Education Students

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Abstract

The prime objective of the study was to determine the defense mechanisms used by Pangasinan State University-Bayambang Campus Bachelor of Elementary Education students by utilizing the descriptive method of research. The results revealed from the two-hundred seventy-six, female-dominated respondents that they often used displacement as a defense mechanism by redirecting their emotions to a substitute target. Often used as well, was rationalization which the college students opted for by offering a socially acceptable and more or less logical explanation for their acts or decisions. Projection was sometimes used. Meanwhile, reaction formation, sublimation, regression, and repression were seldom used. The behaviors and emotions of the students regularly generated defense mechanisms as they attempt to adapt to other environments such as school, boarding houses/dormitories, or with their families. It is recommended that a revisit to the guidance program be conducted to provide possible measures suited to the needs of the students in the changing times.

Keywords: *defense mechanisms, feelings, emotions, behaviors, stress*

Introduction

How people deal with problems and adversity has been under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Adults may have already established ways to deal with these - but for adolescents, there is still a necessity for guidance, alignment, or even reshaping that needs to be provided by significant people around them. These people include teachers, peers, the members of the community, and most especially the parents. With all the hardships and pressures adolescents face as they transition from childhood to adulthood, the people around them are expected to be equipped with knowledge and understanding of their situation for these teenagers to successfully attain individual maturity in all aspects. Yet, even the best strategies or techniques found in books and experiences leave the adolescents groping in the dark, succumbing to the notion that their stage of development, which happens to set in their second year in college, is unproductive, unsure, though creative and fertile. This instability becomes evident to poorly adjusted sophomore adolescents, hence the need for a defense mechanism. These are true with what Cramer (2000) and Vaillant (1993) wrote that the use of defense mechanisms is currently seen as an aspect of normal psychological functioning, serving to reduce anxiety and protect self-esteem. These mechanisms operate at an unconscious level so that the student is unaware of how they function.

The idea that college students may do or say things without knowing just why they do so is not difficult for most people to understand. Among these unconscious processes are a group of mental operations referred to as defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms differ in the ways they function. However, they all serve the same purpose - to protect the individual from experiencing excessive anxiety and oneself and self-esteem.

Sigmund Freud (1896/1966) was responsible for discovering the connection between psychopathology (the study of the causes and development of psychiatric disorders) and the defense mechanism of repression. In his later writings (1915/1957; 1923/1961), Freud stated that people nowadays understand that defense mechanisms are part of one's regular, everyday functioning. When used within limits, defenses aid us in managing stress, disappointment, and strong negative emotions. Only when used excessively is defense be likely to be linked with psychopathology.

After the initial discovery of repression, additional defense mechanisms were identified, like denial, projection, displacement, rationalization. In fact, 44 different defenses have been recorded (Bibring, Dwyer, Huntington, et al., 1961). And two of the most currently used methods to assess defense use include 20 different scales (Andrews, Singh &

Bond, 1993; Perry, 1990). But of course, an individual does not utilize all defenses - and not all defenses are used by all people.

Stress does not exempt the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEE) students of School Year 2019-2020. These may have been brought forth by unresolved conflicts or frustrations that have persisted since their first year of college or fatiguing adjustments they are experiencing in their current year level in the academe. These trials could also be, in particular, financial problems, peer pressures, health-related concerns, environmental changes, and even discoveries about the drastic changes happening in their adolescence. Whatever these stresses are, these young learners certainly had utilized a defense mechanism to cope with, which they might just have discovered or had exhibited instinctively.

Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies brought into play by various entities to cope with reality and maintain self-image. Healthy people habitually use different defenses throughout life. Trying to survive college allows students to experiment on what effective defense

mechanisms they can employ to best deal with their problems and shortcomings with humane conduct without hurting their self-esteem.

Whatever mechanisms these are, the students' emotional maturity plays a vital role in what would have exuded in the course of nature.

Less useful for adjustment, but common in most students are displacement, repression, projection, reaction formation, denial, and undoing. Mature defense mechanisms as forms of coping are rationalization, intellectualization, and sublimation. Meanwhile, defense mechanisms like daydreaming, identification, and regression are considered healthy for children and adolescents are.

This study aimed to look into the defense mechanisms generally used by the Bachelor of Elementary Education students of Pangasinan State University - Bayambang Campus and identify whether it is displacement, reaction formation, repression, projection, rationalization, sublimation, or regression. It also aimed to describe how the student-respondents use each mechanism and if their preferences are appropriate for their ages.

Methodology

The study entitled "The Defense Mechanisms of Bachelor of Elementary Education students" used the descriptive method. The respondents were two hundred eighty-four (284) students enrolled in the first semester of School Year 2019-2020 (BEE-Enhanced General Education first year to third students, and BEE-Pre-Education fourth year students). However, only two hundred seventy-six (276) were able to return the questionnaire.

The defense mechanism checklist, validated by experts, served as the primary data-gathering instrument to assess the defense mechanism of the respondents. The researcher designed a checklist that has five descriptors for each of the seven defense mechanisms specified. The respondents were asked to rate each statement reflecting each value on a five-point scale. Defense mechanisms always used by the respondents were rated 5; often used were rated 4; sometimes used were described 3; seldom used were 2; and 1 for not at all.

Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentage, and average weighted mean were also employed to find the number of male and female respondents and their birth order in the family. Further, the average weighted mean was calculated to indicate the domain of knowledge of the respondent. The descriptive equivalent for the numerical scale was as follows:

Weighted Point	Scale Value	Descriptive Rating
5	4.5 & above	Always
4	3.5 – 4.49	Often
3	2.5 – 3.49	Sometimes
2	1.5 – 2.49	Seldom
1	Below 1.5	Not at All

Results and Discussion

Defense mechanisms are prevalent in the college lives of the respondents. They are created by conflicts in their social or family relationships, by existential problems in their growth towards maturity, and by academic setbacks. Identifying and measuring defense mechanisms are important elements in their college adjustment.

Figure 1 shows the basic information that this study needed. The gender of the respondents is female-dominated as evidenced by a greater percentage of 78% against the 22% of male respondents.

Gender				
	Male	%	Female	%
BEE-EGE First Year	20		70	
BEE-EGE Second Year	19		65	
BEE-EGE Third Year	23		57	
BEE-PRED Fourth Year	0		24	
	60	22%	216	78%

Table 1. Gender of BEE-EGE & BEE-PRED Students

Table 2 shows the defense mechanisms employed by BEE-EGE and BEE-PRED students.

Defense Mechanism	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Rating
Displacement	4.30	Often
Rationalism	3.59	Often
Projection	3.40	Sometimes
Reaction Formation	3.39	Seldom
Sublimation	3.15	Seldom
Regression	3.00	Seldom
Repression	2.50	Seldom
AWM	3.33	<i>Sometimes</i>

Table 2. Defense Mechanisms Employed by Students

The data gathered revealed that displacement, which had a weighted mean of 4.30, was often used by the respondents. The respondents oftentimes throw things when they did not perform well in their practicum; or feel grumpy and irritable when they did not receive the anticipated score in a quiz, even when it was not their fault. Conversely, when the respondents have had a misunderstanding with a friend or a classmate, and they did not want to throw hurtful words at them, they would write all their anger and sentiments on a sheet of paper instead - although they do this seldom. Newman (2001) describes displacement as an experience that involves taking out our frustrations, feelings, and impulses on people or objects that are less threatening. Displaced aggression is a common example of this defense mechanism. Rather than express our anger in ways that could lead to negative consequences (like arguing with our boss), we instead express our anger towards a person or object that poses no threat (such as our spouses, children, or pets).

In the study of Gokdag (2015), the defense mechanism most frequently used by the female and male participants was that of displacement. In patriarchal and traditional societies, anger, which generally occurs because of conflict and frustration, cannot always be directed to the authority to find a solution. Thus, anger is directed from the actual object or person towards other objects or people that will show less or no reaction. Here, the mechanism of "displacement" is utilized.

College adversities that they face like hardships at course requirements, society and peer pressure, unfavorable school environment, strained student-teacher relationships, poor social relations at home, parents and family misunderstandings most likely influenced the students' behavior and employment of such defense mechanism. Nikam and Uplane (2013) mentioned in their study that Adversity Quotient (AQ) score and PRN score indicated a positive relationship to the mature defense mechanism, rationalization, which means that they construct a logical justification for a decision that was originally arrived at through a different mental process that attempts to justify something which is otherwise unjustified.

The second defense, rationalism, had a weighted mean of 3.59 and was also often used by the respondents. Rationalization is a defense mechanism through which an individual gives oneself a more or less logical explanation for an act or decision produced by subconscious impulses (Phaneuf, 2007). The respondents' use of rationalization often might appear logical, as they

mask reality and their lack of commitment and interest. Rationalization also allowed the respondents to hide from difficult situations, tedious studies, and family responsibilities while maintaining their self-image.

The third defense mechanism, projection, has a weighted mean of 3.40 and was sometimes used by the BSE students. It is worth noting that the respondents are in their adolescence - justifying the said result. This is because the kind and quantity of cognitive processes involved in the defense's functioning, as well as the child's ability to "see through" or "demystify" the defense, determine the rise and fall in the usage of different defenses at different developmental stages (Chandler, Paget, & Kock, 1978; Dollinger & McGuire, 1981).

In the study of Cramer (2007) entitled "Longitudinal Study of Defense Mechanisms: Late Childhood to Late Adolescence", the defense of projection increases in use from early childhood to the period of late childhood and late adolescence, when it predominates. Cramer (2007) affirms that projection is also more mature than the defense of denial. Similarly, the respondents made use of projection as a defense when caught in the act of cheating or lying. The respondents explained, however, that they were not the only ones doing it.

Reaction formation reduces anxiety by taking up the opposite feeling, impulse, or behavior. The respondents seldom use this defense mechanism, as evidenced by a 3.39 weighted mean. Part of the students' goal in college is to be able to extend their social world. They try, as much as possible to gain as many acquaintances as possible and to establish a relationship that can grow later. To maintain that relationship, they try not to hurt, humiliate or disappoint their social groups. They endeavor to hide their social feelings even if they would hurt themselves internally. They, then, use reaction formation.

In addition, reaction formation is overacting oppositely to fear, avoiding something by taking a polar opposite position - utilized to hide an individual's true feelings by behaving in the exact opposite manner. The respondents have felt unwanted by their parents. Thus, they became overindulgent and overprotective. Whenever they are raging deep inside, they decide to show affection instead, as a sign of respect to their parents. Further, they sometimes react against the strong sexual attraction they feel toward their opposite-sex by displaying behaviors of a man/woman-hater. They help boost others' morale by displaying their faith in God, but in reality, they too are struggling. Further, there are competitions among college students, and

when the pressure gets real, the respondents cover their true feelings with purportedly contradictory emotions so they would not damage others' feelings. They are also annoyed when their friends gossip about other people's lives instead of talking about important things. However, they enjoy listening and reacting to the gossips.

The fifth defense mechanism was sublimation, with a weighted mean of 3.15 and reported as seldom used. Sublimation allows a person to translate his socially unacceptable drives or feelings into morally and socially accepted ones. When students would not want to interact with people and want to be alone but do not have the opportunity, they may eventually express themselves via painting or composing poetry, although this is seldom. Moreover, according to some of the respondents, because they were aggressive during their childhood and labeled as stubborn in their homes and schools, they chose to be members of an athletic team the moment they entered college. Some of the respondents even pursued a degree in teaching because when they were younger, they were very talkative and often assured that since they talk too much, they might succeed in the fields of teaching or sales. Students who were loathed for being too thrifty before are now able treasurers. These situations illustrate sublimation as a defense mechanism. Sigmund Freud believed that sublimation was a sign of maturity that allows people to function normally in socially accepted ways.

Regression, as a defense, has a weighted mean of 3.00 and was described as seldom used. Among the respondents' accounts of their use of regression is when they attempted to impress their peers by demonstrating how strong and independent, they had grown. In reality, however, they still seek the permission of their parents; and ask for their parents' guidance to solve their problems. Also, the respondents had made noises when a visitor is around to receive attention and caress from their parents. And, when they do not get what they want, they sometimes cry at once. Phaneuf (2007) described regression as a mechanism in which a person returns to a lower developmental stage deemed more appealing and safer at an emotional level. In addition, a prolonged illness, even if not severe, can easily lead to regression. This explains the respondents' seldom use of the defense mechanism - they are healthy and rarely feel ill.

Repression was the last defense used by the respondents with a weighted mean of 2.50 and described as seldom used too as the respondents rarely experience a provocation of emotional overload.

To sum up, there was an average weighted mean of 3.33. This signifies that the defense mechanisms are sometimes used. This further denotes the possibility that the students will use the defenses sometime in the future. The reason can be charged to the change of defense mechanism that happens through different periods. Similarly, in Cramer's (2007) longitudinal study of defense mechanisms used by children to adolescents, there is also evidence that the use of defense mechanisms changes throughout normal development.

Cramer (2008) presented seven basic tenets or pillars of defense mechanism theory. The second pillar states that there is a chronology of defense mechanism development. During the early years of life, Denial is the predominant defense. During middle childhood, Projection predominates, and by late adolescence Identification is predominant. Although more evidence is needed, it appears that the use of Identification may decline after adolescence. Thus, different defenses emerge into prominence at varying points in development. These differences are due, in part, to the increasing cognitive complexity of the defenses, requiring increasingly complex cognitive functioning (Chandler, Paget & Koch, 1976; Cramer, 1991a, 2006; Elkind, 1976). In addition, each defense has its developmental history. Defenses do not just spring up full-blown at different points in development. Rather, each defense has its origins in infant reflexes that gradually evolve into volitional motor behavior, and then into an ideational representation of that behavior – i.e., into a defense

mechanism. Some defenses develop more rapidly than others. Thus, defenses may be characterized in terms of maturity.

Pillar IV in Cramer's (2008) research was that under conditions of stress, the use of defense mechanisms will increase. The respondents in this study sporadically experienced stress that led them to the use of defense mechanisms.

In a study by Schimel, Greenberg & Martens, 2003 as cited by Cramer (2008) in which college students' self-esteem was threatened, the use of the defense of Projection increased. This increase was followed by unacceptable thoughts being removed from conscious awareness. Thus, the use of the defense improved the students' conscious opinion of themselves, thereby protecting self-esteem. These findings support Pillar V: the use of defenses will protect the individual from experiencing negative emotions. In conjunction with the findings from the previously cited information (Pillar IV), these results suggest that increased stress leads to increased defense use, which in turn lessens the conscious experience of anxiety and psychological upset.

Ultimately, all the BEE students (specializing in both Enhanced General Education and Pre-Elementary Education) involved in this study had sometimes employed defense mechanisms in times past.

Conclusions

Behaviors and emotions experienced by BEE-EGE and BEE-PRED college students generate defense mechanisms. However, their reactions vary as they attempt to adapt to other environments such as school, boarding

houses/dormitories, or with their family. These defense mechanisms have functions and were identified as mature mechanisms. Further, these defenses were sometimes used by the students in ordinary situations throughout their lives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended to encourage college students to find ways to ventilate their stress maturely, to eventually experience gaining a greater understanding of different situations. The Guidance Office of the

campus is also suggested to reassess its various activities along with its different services to cater to the needs of and reach out to the students in the changing mode of flexible teaching and learning.

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